

Pity the Children

By Chris Hedges, Truthdig

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or the United States, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will be over soon. We will leave behind, after our defeats, wreckage and death, the contagion of violence and hatred, unending grief, and millions of children who were brutalized and robbed of their childhood. Americans who did not suffer will forget. People maimed physically or psychologically by the violence, especially the Iraqi and Afghan children, will never escape. Time and memory will play their usual tricks. Those who endured war will begin to wonder, years from now, what was real and what was not. And those who did not taste of war's noxious poison will stop wondering at all.

I sat last Thursday afternoon in a small conference room at the University of Massachusetts Boston with three U.S. combat veterans—two from the war in Iraq, one from the war in Vietnam—along with a Somali who grew up amid the vicious fighting in Mogadishu. All are poets or novelists. They were there to attend a two-week writers workshop sponsored by the William Joiner Institute for the Study of War and Social Consequences. It is their voices and those of their comrades that have to be heeded now, and heeded in the future, if we are to curb our appetite for empire and lust for industrial violence. The truth about war comes out, but always too late. And by the time the drums begin beating, the flags waving and the politicians and press hyperventilating as they shout out their nationalist cant, once again we have forgotten what we learned, as if the debacles of the past had no bearing on the debacles of the future.

Joshua Morgan Folmar, 29, a bearded Marine Corps veteran from Alabama who participated in 200 combat patrols in Iraq, sat next to me. He handed me his poem “Contemplating the Cotard Delusion on the Downeaster to Boston.” It begins:

Maybe I'm a walking corpse, or maybe I'm in a coma in
Germany, or Walter Reed, sucking MREs

through plastic tubes, while a few children in Haditha pick up bone shards from the explosion and trade them like card games for chocolate.

My head droops against the window: face reflecting broken limbs and stagnant water, blurring against the train's scratched safety glass. And somewhere out there is my last combat patrol. And somewhere out there, my dead friends are waiting.

Brian Turner, 47, who was a sergeant and infantry team leader in the 3rd Stryker Brigade in Iraq in 2003 and 2004, wrote poems in a small notebook he carried while he was there. They were published in a collection called "Here, Bullet" (Alice James Books). One lament, called "Ashbah" (a transliteration of the Arabic word for "ghosts"), reads:

The ghosts of American soldiers
Wander the streets of Balad by night,
Unsure of their way home, exhausted,
The desert wind blowing trash
Down the narrow alleys as a voice
Sounds from the minaret, a soulful call
Reminding them how alone they are,
how lost. And the Iraqi dead,
they watch in silence from rooftops
as date palms line the shore in silhouette,
leaning toward Mecca when the dawn wind blows.

None of these veterans are at ease in America. They never will be.

"I live in a country that is so wealthy we can wage wars and not have to think about them," Turner said. "It is a pathology handed down from generation to generation. We talk about our military. We use words like 'heroism.' But when will we start to care about people whose names are difficult to pronounce? The list of people lost is so vast. How do I write about this and share it in a country that does not want to hear it? We want narratives that are easy and complete, ones we can process. We want wars to be recorded the way historians or people who make tombstones in cemeteries do. They give us the start, the duration and end of the war. But for those of us who were in war it does not end. If you

talk to my grandfather in Fresno, Calif., at some point during the day you will be in the presence of World War II.”

Combat brings with it trauma for those who inflict the violence as well as those who suffer it. See a lot of combat and the trauma is severe. But the worst trauma is often caused not by what combat veterans witnessed but by what they did. The most disturbing memories usually involve children. War creates bands of ragged, poor, dirty street urchins. The bands wander about the edges of a conflict looking for something to eat. They pick through the garbage dumps. They line the sides of roads begging convoys for food or chocolate. They attempt to sell a few pathetic items to make money. In Iraq they offered American troops “freaky”—the slang for European porn videos—whiskey or heroin (Turner said he doubted there was heroin in the packets). The children lived in fear. They saw their parents, brothers, sisters and grandparents publicly humiliated by occupation troops. They cowered in terror during night raids as troops kicked down the doors of their houses and herded them and their families into rooms where they were made to sit, sometimes for hours, with their arms bound behind their backs with plastic ties. They warily eyed the drones circling overhead day and night, never sure when death would rain down from the sky. They saw brothers and fathers killed. They dreamed of growing up to revenge their deaths.

Children threw rocks at convoys or patrols. They worked as spotters for insurgents and at times they carried automatic weapons. And in the long nightmare of a war of occupation, where every Afghan or Iraqi outside the perimeter of a base was viewed as the enemy, it was not long until children were targets. Soldiers and Marines often threw the bottles they used for urination inside their vehicles at children begging for water along the road.

Folmar said that on occasion children fired air guns at his patrols. The Americans were unable to tell if these were toy guns or real guns and carried out confiscations to avoid killings.

“We would go to shop owners to say, ‘Please don’t sell these,’ ” he said. “One day this kid comes out and shoots at us. We yell ‘Hey!’”

This scares him. We take the gun out of his hand. The father comes up. He is trying to figure out what is going on. We don't have an interpreter. I was a radio operator and was usually next to my squad leader so I was to be the Arabic translator, which is hilarious because I only had two or three weeks of training. Through hand gestures and a little Arabic I tried to explain to the father why we had to take this gun away. We did not want his kid to die. If it were dark we would not know if that was [an air] gun or not. The father did not understand. I don't blame him. I had crappy Arabic. My squad leader was exhausted and pissed. He pulled out his M9 service pistol and put it in the father's face. He said, 'Do you understand this?' "

Children threw rocks into the windshields of passing trucks. This was a persistent problem that caused some U.S. troops to answer with live fire.

"Kids would run out and throw rocks at us," Turner said. "We were going 35 or 40 miles an hour. A rock hits you like that and you can be damaged for life. One of those kids smashed the windshield of one of the freight trucks. It jackknifed, flipped and the driver died in about 90 seconds. I remember hearing over the radio some higher-up saying, 'You are authorized to shoot children.' "

The schizophrenic nature of the war meant that on some days children were to be courted and on other days threatened. The children could never tell how troops would respond.

"The rules of engagement constantly changed," Folmar said. On some days it was shoot anything in sight. Then it would be about hearts and minds. Giving out chocolate. Giving stuff to schools that were blown to bits. We would carry candy. Then the next week the kids would scream 'Chocolate! Chocolate!' and we would have been told to keep the kids away."

"We were on patrol and I was pegged by a rock on the head," Folmar said. "The father comes out of nowhere and starts whacking the shit out of this kid. We were all laughing. But later on I thought what kind

of world must you live in where the father is beating the crap out of his son? It was partly out of respect. But it was also about recognizing that your kid can be killed for throwing a rock.”

“There was this point where we really started, I don’t want to say hating the children, but we were exasperated,” said Folmar, who emphasizes that he never saw Americans shoot a child during his deployment. “We became cynical. There became a moment where we realized we were stuck in it. That what we were doing was just creating a new generation that would hate each other. It never got to the point where anyone in my unit said let’s just kill them, but there became a moment when we all felt ‘What is the point?’ We were making them mad. They are going to hate us. It’s just going to continue.”

Folmar said that when U.S. troops inspected trucks at checkpoints many of the vehicles were carrying corpses to be buried and it was not uncommon to see corpses of children. “It was a regular thing,” he said.

The war in Vietnam had many of the same dynamics, with the added abuse of thousands of girls who populated brothels that sprang up outside the vast military bases and in cities like Saigon. George Kovach, 66, the third combat veteran in our group last Thursday, was wounded in Vietnam with a friend from his unit. When they were being evacuated by helicopter his friend died next to him. Forty years later he says he still fights off depression and thoughts of suicide.

“I remember soldiers chucking C-ration cans at the heads of children—I know I did, and sometimes it was worse,” he said. “There were lots of kids that were camp followers. In Vietnam these kids would point you out [to the Viet Cong]. When we left on patrol we were always worried the kids would report our movements.”

People who carry weapons and travel with armed units have a terrifying God-like power to humiliate, to demand instant and unquestioned obedience and to kill. Those who do not carry weapons live in states of unrelenting terror and powerlessness. The powerless often seek to become invisible, avoiding contact with the hydra-headed groups

of killers that roam the landscape and speak in the language of violence.

Boyah J. Farah, 36, endured the war in Somalia as a teenager with his mother. He was the oldest of five siblings. During our Boston meeting he listened in silence to the stories of the military veterans, remembering, he said, what it was like to be on the other side of the divide. He quoted an African proverb: “When the elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.”

“Militia would come into the city and take everything,” Farah said. “Then that militia would be defeated. A new militia would come in. Each militia that came in was hungry, hungry to steal, hungry to rape. They would take everything, including our small amount of rice. If there were food on the stove they would take it. As soon as you thought you had adapted, new militias appeared.”

Turner turned to Farah. “I used to kick in people’s doors,” he said to him. “My job was to do raids night after night after night. I wonder about this now. And this is difficult for me to write about. I can write about what it is like to kick in a door. But ... I wonder about the kids that were in some of those houses. When the war is over do you feel comfortable in your own house? Do you feel safe?”

Farah shook his head. “Once you go through that experience it never goes away,” he answered. “It is like the experience you had [in combat]. I came here [to the United States] in 1993. I never feel completely safe. I never get used to the Fourth of July. As soon as I hear the boom sound [of the fireworks] the war comes. Even the bang of a door brings it back.”

“I escaped,” Farah said. “I got educated. I came to a country at peace. But most of my friends did not make it to a peaceful country. They remained behind. And those left behind lived only for revenge. When I was in the refugee camp in Kenya I heard my friend, whose father was killed, pray out loud and say: ‘God, I don’t know what you have planned for me. But I am going back and kill 100 men.’ He was 16 or 17. I am sure he went back. I am sure he killed. I doubt he is alive.”

None of this is what these veterans or children wanted. They wanted, and continue to want, what we were created for—love. And the battle with the demons of war is the battle back to what is sacred and whole in life. Some will make it. Many will not.

“The hardest thing to write about is love,” Turner said. “It comes across as sappy. This inability to write about love is part of the pathology of war. Writing about war is easy. War is addictive. I am drawn to that sort of frenetic experience. But what I want is love. I want to write poems for my wife. But when I try they are not good.”

Folmar voiced a similar thought. “I understand violence,” he said. “I can put it on a page. I can do it well. But it is the love that I can’t do. How am I supposed to write about love? Especially when I have these other things to write about. My wife asked me, ‘You write about all these sad things. When are you going to write about me?’ I have to get the other stuff out first. I am hoping I will get it out. I am hoping it will go away.”